

Reflections on the metropolitan identity of urban redevelopment in the outskirts of Madrid

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Introduction

The reason for this paper, entitled “Reflections on the metropolitan identity of urban redevelopment in the outskirts of Madrid”, lies on the current interest of considering public art as the main creative and rehabilitating element that defines the metropolitan identity, and in particular, that of Madrid’s peripheral districts_.

To understand this issue, it’s necessary to introduce two well-known factors: the phenomenon of urban redevelopment in city outskirts, and the evolution of public art in the international art scene.

THE PHENOMENON OF URBAN REDEVELOPMENT IN THE MADRID OUTSKIRTS

The generalised urban transformation and renovation process of urban spaces in Spain, is particularly intense in the peripheral districts of big cities such as Madrid, Barcelona or Valencia.

These peripheral districts, composed mainly of small towns, have expanded considerably in the past few decades. A clear example of this phenomenon is the belt of districts surrounding Madrid, such as Alcobendas, Alcorcon, Leganes Mostoles o San Sebastian de los Reyes.

In the fifties, when the labour force from rural areas started emigrating to urban areas (they came mainly from poor regions such as Andalusia or Extremadura), the small labour huts of the outskirts turned into individual family houses.

During the next two decades, the sixties and the seventies, the growth of these peripheral areas was disorganised, lacking infrastructures and basic services, due to the strong speculation of the land that lead to massive constructions of council block housing in agricultural fields.

After the democratic transition (1978), and specially throughout the eighties, the principle of “quantity” that had marked the two previous decades, slowly gave way to the idea of improving the “quality” of urban spaces. The growing importance of local governments in the decision-making process, the assignment of larger budgets and the increasing participation of citizens in the district’s activities strongly contributed to this transformation.

Therefore, in the eighties and nineties, peripheral municipalities dedicated considerable efforts and investments in :



1. View of a district of Móstoles built in the seventies

.- planning new construction following structured plans and regulations;

.- providing basic infrastructures in built areas, such as road access, bus and train stations, road pavement, street lighting and draining. .- building of schools, sport centres, health centres, public parks, libraries and cultural centres, in order to structure what was already built, improve the living conditions of the inhabitants, and most of all, attract private investments.

To these basic infrastructures, we can add regional infrastructures such as new highways, the creation of a subway line for the southern part of Madrid or the construction of new universities.



2.Pavement in Móstoles

As a result of this process, we find that, in a homogeneous and standardised landscape characterised by an urban layout lacking innovative solutions, local governments have used art to decorate public areas.

PUBLIC ART IN THE INTERNATIONAL ART SCENE

In the international art scene, urban spaces are consolidated as the main reference and action-ground for contemporary art.

Thanks to the sponsoring of cultural institutions and of organisers of cultural festivals, such as the Dokumenta festival in Kassel, the Project of Münster or the prestigious bi-annual of Venice or Habana, urban spaces have become one of the most highly developed fields of action- both professionally and commercially- by the different avant garde proposals of the last decades. The proliferation of permanent public art has been followed by ephemeral experimental events of urban intervention.

In same way, in Spain, specially last decade, permanent public art and ephemeral experimental events of urban intervention has been produced by the cultural institutions .

Urban spaces have hosted all kind of artistic proposals, going from critic public art to social art, including communitarian art, virtual art... mostly “domestic art”, in all types of municipalities located in rural, metropolitan, seaside or in-land areas.

The problem

1.-THE NEED TO BUILD AN IDENTITY

To the two elements we have just mentioned, the urban redevelopment in the outskirt districts, and the evolution of public art in the international art scene, we have to add a third element, which is the local governments’ will of preserving and consolidating tradition, and giving the district a unique emblem, in order to bring closer a young, multi-cultured and root-less population.

Although there hasn't been a specific effort to find characteristic features that allow people (both inhabitants and "outcomers") to adapt to the rapid changes of the urban landscape, it's true that urban societies seem less rooted to their territory and can no longer be defined as communities sharing only land, language and government. It also seems that urban societies are more like communities of consumers, that is, groups of people that use and share certain goods (urban, sportive, musical...) that gives them a shared identity. It's important to highlight that, when it comes to materialising a urban area, political, economic and speculative interests and artistic interests, have not been properly combined with the search of meaning for those areas.

Nowadays, these municipalities, with a larger population than many of the Spanish capitals of province (between 100.000 and 200.000 inhabitants) and composed by individuals of different origins (including recent African, Latin-American and Eastern European immigrants), face the problem of building their own identity.

The city hosting all those people has lost the values and identity of the region and culture it belongs to: where there was only one virgin to worship, there are now several gods; where the daily routine was standardised and marked by tradition, we find radically different ways of life; where everyone's private life was well known, we now have no references.

The city's inhabitants are far from their points of reference and feel confused, because, apart from suffering from eradication, they're forced to interpret a large number of codes in order to adapt to the high speed of the messages being exchanged. Everyone is imbued by this new and hegemonic modern culture that becomes essential in order to grow in the public world.

The few initiatives that deal with this problem have been proposed by district associations that claim for solutions to their needs, and have been carried out by the Women's rights and Social Affairs departments of the local governments.

2.-ART OUT OF CONTEXT

Artistic actions carried out in these municipalities to deal with the identity problem have not had a major impact:

permanent public art works, promoted through urban development projects, have consisted mostly of objects. Note that the intense transformation and renovation process of the urban spaces has gone hand in hand with an indiscriminate distribution of sculptures in the numerous roundabouts of the wide, new avenues. What is more, these objects are normally large-scale abstract sculptures ("monumental") or in the worst cases, populist, not pertinent or inadequate for their location. "Open Air Museums" of outdated formalistic works, to say the least.



3. Rogelio López Cuenca: Decret I. 1992. Seville. The Universal Exhibition "Expo'92" of Seville, and the World Olympic Games of Barcelona were the major events celebrated in the nineties.



4. Enrique Vara: s/t. Alcorcón (Madrid). The city of Alcorcón is wellknown by its roundabouts.

Ephemeral public art works are mainly promoted by the Culture and Social Affairs departments of local governments through commissions charged of organising events for the local festivities, and by isolated artistic initiatives inserted in the annual cultural agenda of festivals, street theatre, music, graffiti... These ephemeral works have not transcended the boundaries of the artistic ground to express a concrete idea on the control over the public domain and to offer a feasible alternative to the actual structuring of public space, currently organised following the principles of productivity and speculation. (Ephemeral works come closer to a form of entertainment).

Despite the growing participation of local associations in the events organised by peripheral municipalities, the work that artists actually carry out is a symbolic gesture in the local festivities' agenda. This means that peripheral municipality actions promoted by social movements do not count with an active participation of artists, in opposition to what happens in the project "reHABI(li)TAR Lavapiés" of the centre of Madrid or the one in the Valencian district of El Cabanyal.



5. Fernando Sánchez-Castillo. Dutch Landscape. 2000. Alcorcón (Madrid). A car equipped with a timer, a smoke machine, and smoke spilling out of the half-open windows was displayed in different places around the city each day. This piece alluded to urban catastrophes.

Conclusions

A heartbreaking outcome, as Félix Guisasola already announced in the conference on the city's identity held last year in the district of Mostoles: "we can hardly do anything, and to do something, so many elements have to match, that it makes it almost impossible".

First of all we must highlight the lack of artistic policies coming from local governments, in the form of public tenders (open or restricted) to give a meaning to concrete areas, as well as artistic counselling. Instead, and taking the city as an enormous art gallery, local governments have done assignments concerning the extension of existing sculptures done by internationally known artists (like the case of the "Menina" of Manolo Valdés in Alcobendas). There are also special agreements with institutions, such as foundations and universities, but they have not passed the theoretical stage. There's a total separation of urbanism and artistic projects, and multidisciplinary working groups are non-existent. The construction of residential areas communicated by highways and the creation of shopping centres show that the urban peripheral districts are not building cities, but following the pattern of "nice and cheap" and most of all, of unconcerned construction.



6. Flyer of the project "reHABI(li)TAR Lavapiés", 1998

Secondly, the need to leave aside the “merely decorative” criteria associated to public art or the idea of making museums out of streets. In peripheral municipalities, given the social interaction and the co-existence of different cultural heritages, artistic creations should allude to the peripheral condition and the need of creating public spaces, to cultural diversity and identity pluralism, to district associations, to the lack of roots, to the lack of history or to denial of history. Despite the fact that most artists call for the “death of the monument”, ephemeral artistic initiatives are closer to entertainment than to citizens’ movements. Artists, with their different influences, develop mainly gallery art, more focused on the impact of their works in the artistic world than on the real contribution to the urban development of the municipality they’re in.



Finally, the previously mentioned “domestic art” that profits from public art does not raise the question of the materialisation of urban spaces, but merely concentrates on exposing their proposals in a concrete location. In this sense, it’s interesting to name the work carried out by Gloria Picazo in Lerida as contemporary art counsellor in the city council. She’s trying to stop the tendency of locating no matter what in urban spaces, defending and promoting the existence of a reason explaining the location of each action.

There are many different interests and very little action. We have still a long way to go in the field of materialising urban spaces.

(NOTE)

LAST YEAR, THE AUTHOR PRESENTED HER THESIS ON PUBLIC ART AND COLLABORATED WITH THE PAINTING DEPARTMENT OF THE FINE ARTS FACULTY AT THE COMPLUTENSE UNIVERSITY OF MADRID IN ONE OF THE PROJECTS COVERING METROPOLITAN DISTRICTS OF THE CITY OF MADRID. THIS PROJECT FOCUS ON MÓSTOLES, ONE OF THE OUTSKIRTS CITIES OF MADRID, HAS BEEN PROGRAMMED FOR FOUR YEARS. THE WORK OF THE FIRST YEAR CONSISTED OF STUDYING THE PLACE (CHARACTERISTICS, LOCAL PLANNING AND LOCAL ASSOCIATIONS), CREATING PROPOSALS THE PERMANENT AND EPHIMERAL PUBLIC ART AND, FINALLY, CELEBRATING A NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM, -WHERE LOCAL AUTHORITIES, LOCAL ASSOCIATIONS AND NATIONAL EXPERTS WERE INVITED-, TO DISCUSS THESE PROPOSALS AND CONCEPTS CONNECTED WITH PUBLIC ART AND URBAN SPACE